

# Soldiers

Online

**A**T Tripler Army Medical Center, Hawaii, a woman lay in a recovery room in a catatonic state. For weeks, she hadn't responded to anyone or anything.

Then one of the dogs in the Red Cross-sponsored Human-Animal Bond Program came to visit.

The dog repeatedly placed a ball in the woman's lap, not in the least bit discouraged that she kept brushing it off to the floor, said Sandy Lord, who took over the then 4-year-old HAB Program at Tripler in 1993, when it included only six animals. Lord has since transformed the program into what she describes as the largest one in the Army.

"The dog, of course, thought the

woman wanted to play," said Lord, who remembers similarly isolating herself for two years after her husband died in 1991. The woman's simple response — sparked by annoyance — was, nonetheless, a response. And doctors, who had failed to elicit any movement from the woman, were encouraged.

The woman is one of many patients who have been able to escape self-imposed isolation based on fear and pain, said CPT Klon Kitchen Jr., a chaplain in Tripler's Department of Ministry and Pastoral Care.

Some 30 volunteers — many of them couples — participate in the HAB Program that collectively allows their pets to visit virtually every ward



**Volunteer Ken Schoeff and his black Schipperke, Oli, are also regular visitors to Tripler's wards.**

at the hospital, seven days a week, often several times a day. The 30 visiting animals include 26 dogs, two cats and two rabbits.

Ron and Dolores Harris accompany Cherokee, their 6-year-old male Doberman, through the wards, while Barbara and Ken Schoeff visit with their 12-year-old Schipperke, Oli.

"Dobermans have a reputation for being mean and aggressive," Dolores said. "This is our opportunity to not only cheer peoples' spirits, but show them how gentle Dobermans can be."

On a recent day, Cherokee, wearing a red bow tie, strutted down the hospital corridors alongside Oli, whose colorful flower lei drew oohs and aahs from young and old alike. Even the doctors and nurses on the wards became animated.

One little girl noticed Oli's picture nametag and wanted to know if she was a doctor. Another child brought out her camera to capture the scene as a group of laughing, chattering children all converged in the pediatric ward corridor to cuddle and "talk" to the two furry visitors.

"What kind of nails does he have?" 4-year-old Fitz Dickson asked about Cherokee. "What's his last name? He's



**Human-Animal Bond Program volunteer Dolores Harris introduces her dog, Cherokee, to Alexandra Trimble (center) and her family at Hawaii's Tripler Army Medical Center.**

# Pets Helping

big. I wonder if my dog would like him?"

The animals — for a time — diverted the boy's attention from his own illness. "When Fitz's blood sugar gets too low, he has seizures," his mom said. He'd been in the hospital a week, due to persistent vomiting and inability to stay awake.

Oli jumped into bed with 6-year-old Yunique Kelsey, the son of Roslyne and SGT Robert Kelsey, who's assigned to the 725th Transportation Battalion at Schofield Barracks.

The boy suffers from sickle-cell anemia and was hospitalized with a swollen spleen. "The disease causes a lot of pain and fever," Roslyne said. "But when the dogs come, he forgets about all of that."

Three-year-old Alexandra Trimble sat with her dad, SPC Wayne Trimble, and twin sister, Alexis. One minute everything was quiet and rather sedate. The next minute Cherokee and Oli bounded into the room and things got lively.

Despite the awkward plastic oxygen tube in her nose and the monitors all around, Alexandra ran toward the dogs, wrapping her arms around their necks. Repeatedly, she tossed her stuffed lamb high into the air, calling it a moose that was thrilled Oli and Cherokee had come.

Her dad said Alexandra had seen them and other animal visitors before — last Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year — when she was hospitalized for the same thing — pneumonia, resulting from reactive airway disease.

"When patients are given a terminal diagnosis, I almost always refer to the HAB

program, because it's very calming," Kitchen said. "The animals take the very sick to better times and quiet them down. They bring a touch of normalcy into the not-so-normal, often sterile environment of a hospital."

"Patients with life-threatening illnesses, like cancer, who must undergo lengthy chemotherapy treatments, often don't have much to look forward to," added Dr. (LTC) Craig Holland, chief of consultation psychiatry. "For pet is the best part of an otherwise grim day."

Dr. (CPT) Scott Moran, a family practice resident at Tripler, echoed Holland's sentiments. "This is an artificial environment," he said. "Often, kids are afraid of the

doctors. When the animals are around, it's often easier for us to make a connection with the children."

And it's not only the children who benefit, Moran said. Medical professionals have realized profound improvements in the emotional and often physical well being

patients

**Story and Photos by  
Heike Hasenauer**





*"The HAB Program counters the dehumanizing effect of technology and reinforces the importance of relationships."*

of their patients of all ages when pets visit. Psychiatric patients are among those who benefit most.

"I see people on different wards who have a combination of psychiatric and physical problems," Holland said. "The easiest approach is to address their biological needs — the benefits of medicine and technology.

"The paradox is that patients feel loss of control because the technology is so overwhelming. It's like going to the moon and wondering what will happen next," he said. "The HAB Program counters the dehumanizing effect of technology and reinforces the importance of relationships.

"We forget how important relationships are — with animals as well as people. Animals provide unconditional love," Holland added. "And we see examples of people's desire for a closeness with animals everywhere."

Health professionals have long noted the beneficial value of a pet's

companionship. Researchers say owning a pet redirects a focus from one's self — such as away from physical ailments — and reduces stress, averts depression and speeds recovery from illness, Holland said.

It's been noted that "people with high blood pressure can simply stroke an animal and bring their blood pressure down," Kitchen said.

Doctors hoped it would work for 5-year-old Rachael Ryan, the daughter of Patricia and MAJ Timothy Ryan, who's assigned to the 556th Personnel Services Battalion at Schofield Barracks. Rachel had been hospitalized for a week with high blood pressure due to an inflammation of the kidneys and pneumonia in both lungs.

"Animals benefit stroke victims who have little strength in their extremities, too," Holland said. "Often, they'll forget their weaknesses and reach out to touch the animals anyway. It's great physical therapy.



**During their rounds Cherokee and the other HAB animals also visit Tripler's waiting areas and lounges.**

"Where the focus is on health, disability and death, doctors and nurses get stressed, too," Holland continued. "The pets are a plus in our lives as well."

In the hospital environment, among children and the elderly, HAB Program administrators have to be sure the animals will not react negatively to any stimuli.

Before an animal is accepted into the program, it must pass several screenings, Lord said. Among them is a "good citizenship" test, which measures an animal's ability to interact well with humans.

Army veterinarian Dr. (MAJ) Abbie Whitehead, who's assigned to Kaneohe Marine Corps Base on Oahu, conducts a temperament test and certifies the animals' medical records.

She might gently pull on a dog's leg, pinch his ear and drop something at his feet to gauge his reactions. "My assistant hides around a corner and jumps out, opening up an umbrella," said Whitehead. That would shake up a lot of people. But the animals must remain calm.

In the end, Lord is the one who decides who's in and who isn't.

"I've never turned down an animal — just three people," said Lord. "They were looking more for therapy for themselves. We're about helping other people."

"And there are almost no people who don't like pets, and almost no pets who don't like people," Holland concluded. "Animals and people. It's a winning combination." □

## Other Human-Animal Programs

**T**HE FIRST Army-sponsored human-animal bond program was begun in 1985 at the Soldiers' and Airmen's Home in Washington, D.C. A second program followed several months later at Brooke Army Medical Center at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

Today, many Army hospitals have human-animal bond programs, most notably Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. "It's by far the best and the biggest," said Dr. (COL) Lynn Anderson, who started the Army's first human-animal bond program at BAMC while stationed there as chief of the Veterinary Medicine Branch.

Anderson developed the idea of using animals as a form of patient therapy based on his involvement with similar programs in the civilian community.

Today, he's back at Fort Sam Houston as a personnel proponent staff officer-Veterinary Corps representative.

Elsewhere, according to Anderson, the Army is responsible for, or is participating in, numerous programs to train pets and help people cope with disabilities, illness and grief through the use of pets.

Among those are animal visitation and therapeutic horsemanship programs; canine obedience training programs; programs that help pet owners deal with the emotional loss of a pet, and responsible pet ownership programs. At Fort Knox, Ky., an animal-aid program allows soldier-inmates to train dogs to help people with disabilities. [See "Service Dogs — Redefining Disabilities," in the July 1998 *Soldiers*.]

"More and more people within the Veterinary Corps want to become involved in such programs," Anderson said. "And more and more, high-level people are realizing the remarkable contributions pets make." — Heike Hasenauer